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ABSTRACT

The focus of this workshop will be on a model for conducting Divorce Adjustment Groups. Included in the model will be the purpose of the group, the goals, the selection of the members, the size and frequency and duration of the group meetings, and most importantly, the techniques used in working through the issues and dynamics of divorce. Methods of presentation will be lecture, discussion and demonstration. The model for Divorce Adjustment groups has evolved into its present form after four years of specializing in divorce counseling. Specific exercises are used to help persons gain self mastery over the dissolution process. Particular items addressed are: (1) working with children during divorce; (2) relating to friends who might feel awkward; (3) relating to the former spouse during the divorce process; (4) rules for equitable settlement of divorce issues such as child custody, property settlement etc.; (5) handling the possible anger, frustration and ambiguity of divorce; (6) setting new goals; (7) initiating new friendships; and (8) regaining emotional autonomy. The central purposes of these Divorce Adjustment Groups is to provide group support in a limbo period, provide a place to drain excess emotionality, as well as to learn skills for a healthy divorce process. (Author)

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DIVORCE COUNSELING

American Personnel and Guidance Assoc.
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STAGES OF DIVORCE

Divorce, like marriage, is a process. After working with hundreds and hundreds of divorcing persons over the years, and after doing some empirical work on divorce adjustment, I have repeatedly observed a natural progression of stages in this divorce process. Every person experiences these stages differently (and some may skip a stage or two altogether). Likewise, for some individuals the entire process happens silently and internally, for others loudly and with much visibility. But unless a person gets stuck in one of the stages, it is comforting to know that divorce adjustment does have a normal progression to it. Since divorce adjustment has its roots in the marriage, that is where we will begin.

Stage 1: Disillusionment

Emotional divorce often begins innocently and insidiously. Disillusionment is when you begin to undress the spouse psychologically. The shroud of romantic fiction is dropped. That person who is to fulfill almost all of your expectations, needs and ideals turned out to be depressed, sloppy, a compulsive eater, uninformed, unaffectionate, asocial, domineering, insensitive, uncaring, a flirt, nagging, overly dependent, overly self-sufficient, oversexed or any other characteristic that is incompatible with your needs. Unprepared to deal with visible differences, the disillusioned spouse often concentrates on the negative.

While these thoughts and statements intrude on the happiest of marriages, prolonged time spent dwelling on them sows the seeds of destruction. At first, awareness of marked differences will slip in and out of consciousness. One moment the partner is the best thing going, the next moment the difference seems intolerable. The progression involves an increased proportion of time spent thinking about the negative.

The disillusionment stage can be helpful when it integrates the expectations of two people with reality. Normally it takes a while to find out what the real costs of an intimate relationship are. To the extent that these grievances are openly aired and resolved, the marriage remains healthy. The couple at this stage has the opportunity to rework their contract so as to meet as many of each other's needs as possible while accepting those they cannot change. Persons who progress on to the next stage, erosion, have stockpiled negative emotions so long that it becomes necessary to purge them (although this usually happens in a rather self-defeating way). The first stage is quite easily reversed if two people are willing and able to admit differences and modify their habits for one another while accepting the unchangeable.

Stage 2: Erosion

Erosion is the wearing away of marital satisfaction. Although the awareness of dissatisfaction is more conscious at this stage, often the sources are not fully known to the dissatisfied person. If the reasons were known, acknowledged and dealt with maturely and confidently with the other person, the couple could come to terms with the problem and be happily recycled back to the beginning of these stages. Erosion may slip into both

non-verbal and verbal behavior. At a social gathering the couple may compete to see how much attention one can win at the expense of the other. Erosion can show through a simple dagger-look when the partner is telling a story. One or both may begin to spend money recklessly. Sometimes, a careful vigilance is maintained to make sure that one does not give any more than the other. The concentration in this period is on taking rather than giving; being loved instead of loving. Both partners feel they are not getting enough.

Avoidance too may passively erode the relationship. Instead of straightening out the emotional difficulty, one or both partners may avoid coming home. One or both partners may gradually stop "confiding" in the other and may start investing emotional energy in some outside acitivity or person.

Sex can turn into a proving ground. The wife or husband can feign a complete lack of interest while the other partner accelerates his or her demands. Sex becomes a battleground where frigidity or impotency expresses the frozen anger. Both disillusionment and erosion can be reversed. Marriage counseling is indicated for both of these stages. Disillusionment is easier for a counselor to work with; erosion is a bit harder. Disillusionment stays mostly in the mind. Erosion instills habits that also acquire pay-off values. Repetition of put-down behaviors and words engenders a feeling of superiority. Putting the spouse down in front of company brings a rewarding laugh. Flirting with friends builds the ego and punishes the jealous mate. Yet, the marriage is salvageable during erosion. Despite the destructiveness, the couple are still very much involved with each other. They are still dependent on the remnants of love and prevalence of security that the other

provides. Fights may brutalize, but the couple is still fighting. Hurts are deep because the two people still care for each other. Therapeutic intervention into the communication processes of the family can help interrupt this trend.

Stage 3: Detachment

Detachment involves a series of emotional deaths. If a couple cares enough to fight with each other, the relationship can usually be mended. If a couple feels a low commitment to the relationship, has an eye on the escape hatch, barely shares or talks, avoids physical affection or sex, doesn't look into each other's eyes, very little can be done. Here we find the speechless animosity of mutual disrespect.

The non-verbal manifestations of detachment are obvious. Eyes are cast down or look past the other person. Bodies are turned away from each other. Arms and legs become locked and symbolically block out the other person. Voices are either harsh and strident or barely audible. Ears don't hear. Faces sullenly mask feelings. Remarks are cursory and succinct, barely answering the question. Each period at the end of a sentence, rather than opening up communication, cuts it off. A feeling of tenseness contaminates the air. The emotional plain is arid and barren. The underlying feeling in detachment is "I don't care." The period is not so much one of an intensified conflict as it is increasing boredom with the conflict. The person finds that the conflict no longer interests him or her. The coldness that was at first withholding of love has become habitual and natural. Empty hulls of people pass each other in routine. Excitement, vitality, investment, enthusiasm, giving and tolerating are either all anesthetized or transferred to another

person, hobby, skill, animal or job. Many times only one person goes through the detachment stage prior to physical separation. The prognosis for a person who has been through a prolonged period of deadened emotions is low as far as recommitment to the emotional marriage. If the therapist finds a couple asking for marital counseling where one or both people manifest this prolonged detachment, the prognosis is rather poor. The tragedy is that many well-intentioned persons start marriage committed to the person and the marriage. They pass through these stages unknowingly and find themselves with deadened emotions that the other can no longer vitalize. By the time the person appears at the counselor's door, little can be done to save the marriage. Detachment in its full-blown stages involves a switch from a past to a future orientation. The detached person begins to dream of his or her own future--without the spouse. Fantasies of what single life would be like frequently occur. Concrete figuring of the financial gains and losses in being divorced preoccupies the mine. A person often measures his or her appeal to the opposite sex by being attentive to flirtatious glances. Little rehearsals of independence may come in the form of insisting on nights out during the week when the spouse does not know one's whereabouts. Often one or the other will go back to school to prepare for a career and to increase financial self-sufficiency. Vacillation may be a painful process during this stage. To be or not to be single again? As the decision becomes imminent, anger sets in. The person who has been waivering gradually leans to one side: angry separation. Somehow anger makes it easier to decide yet the other side of than ambivalence is still present. "Maybe we could just try living apart for a while to see if we can patch up the marriage.

Maybe separation will help us get back together." But the approach-avoidance battle continues. "Do I really have the courage to go it alone?" "Do I really want to go through the loneliness of being single?" "Isn't security better than happiness?" During this time it becomes important to test these questions out with others and see if some easier remedy is available.

Stage 4: Physical Separation

Physical separation benchmarks either the end or the beginning of trauma. For those who spent years preparing to get divorced in building up the courage to get out of an intolerable marriage, physical separation brings enormous relief. For others who are unprepared and still emotionally involved in a partner, physical separation can leave a person in shock. But most all newly separated persons have to face the loneliness, anxiety, initial confusion, and the formation of the new identity. The creative aspects of these states are hardly visible at this point. Loneliness is one of the most feared reactions to physical separation.

The American culture nourishes insidious fears of loneliness. This does not help the divorced person face the extra hours released by the separation. Societal rewards center around conformity, action, acquisition, ambition, imitation, order and predictability. Experiencing aloneness, the unique characteristics of the self and innermost motivations conflict with these attitudes and values of our culture. Being alone with one's self represents nothingness, a void, to most people. More recent emphasis on relaxation, yoga, and transcendental meditation are helping people to learn the peace that may accompany aloneness. We are learning that loneliness can

also be creative. The depth of feeling generates a bond or sense of fundamental relatedness to others. Out of loneliness comes creativity, strong determination, courage and deep commitment.

Anxiety is another common emotion immediately following physical separation. One of the main anxieties is the fear of the unknown, Marriage has timeposts built into it. An individual can anticipate a vacation, visits with the relatives or a time when the car is paid off, etc. Future is unknown to a divorcing individual. Since it is a time of transition, many divorcing individuals change their vocations, lifestyles, residences and friends. Thus, the externals which provide timeposts are no longer present.

Newfound worries add to this fear. The separated person may worry about meeting financial needs, about being attractive to the opposite sex, about being able to select another mate, about what parents will think, about the effect of divorce on children, about the decline in self-esteem without a partner, and so forth. A whole new set of challenges provide a whole new set of worries.

Breaking secure, comfortable habits provides a powerful disruption. The tremendous inertia attached to changing a little habit is underestimated. Routines provide a way for people to relax, turn off anxieties, and still obtain goals. Everyday is interwoven with hundreds of these little habit threads. These habits may be anything from the road driven to work in the morning, the time and way dinner is prepared, the way the children are carpooled to school. Immediately following separation, these threads are broken. A person may have to get into a new carpool. He or she may have to take on a second job. Old friends disappear. The old familiar daily routine has been disrupted. The uncertainty and lack of practice with new

behaviors may elicit restlessness and vulnerability. Not only do these secure old habits need to be broken, but the individual worries about being able to adapt his or her habits to new people or situations. The anticipation of new people, new jobs, new hobbies, new ways of relating to the children, new ways of relating to the immediate family feeds more frustration into an already vulnerable period.

Stage 5: Mourning

The stage of mourning helps to purge the former partner from the inner self. Mourning is a web of anger, hurt, loneliness, relief, and helplessness. The psychic cleansing is essential. Mourning helps rid one's self of the ghosts. If the process does not happen following separation or divorce, chances are it will appear unexpectedly at a later point in time.

The process of mourning is a critical turning point. It is a point when the individual turns from facing the past and works through the letting go process. Many persons report they know the exact moment when they reached the point of no return. Beyond that point, the individual's hope for reconciliation begins to diminish rapidly. Many persons mark this fork with symbols. One client may take off his/her wedding ring; another say "no" to the former spouse for the first time; another take a job in a different city.

Mourning during divorce may unleash anger. Anger needs a target and will attack anything, but generally heads for familiar territory--the former spouse. The anger appears in irritability, loss of patience, increased rigidity and increased demands. A person with unleashed anger hurls imbittered accusations at the ne'er-do-right spouse.

Naturally the angry former spouse is not at his or her best. Friends, unfortunately, often do not understand the source of the anger and take it personally. Feeling the divorcing person's hostility, the friend may react

personally and thereby feeds the anger. Understanding that this release of anger is a necessary part of divorce helps to let the person unwind. The angry stage grows into a more compassionate, less rational behavior.

Anger has a functional value. Anger fills a vacuum created by emotional detachment. Anger is a common way of protecting ourselves from that utterly devastating feeling of total separation. Angry acts insure that the former spouse does not entirely cut you out of his or her thoughts. An ugly little spot in his or her mind is better than no spot at all. Likewise, it is easier to let go of someone you are angry with than someone you love.

Depression may also accompany the mourning. Depression is the sibling of anger: both involving blame. In depression the person, instead of blaming another, blames him or herself. In a constructive sense, depression can be a reaction against the past loss and be preparation for future losses. The sadness of depression prepares the person to deal with the losses when they arise in reality.

Panic may accompany mourning when the individual has fused the relationship with his/her identity; the only source of self-exteem, panic may accompany this process of grief. Many clients report a life or death turning point in this stage. As one client emotionally disclosed, "I woke up one morning and decided I wanted to life before I died." Helping a person realize that the person need not die (psychologically) just because the relationship is terminal can be a meaningful therapeutic intervention.

A second stumbling block in mourning is when depression is coupled with guilt. Here a person denies the mourning by diverting attention. The attention is diverted from the loss of the significant other to the enormity

of the personal guilt. "If I only hadn't demanded so much, my spouse would have stayed." "I shouldn't have kept threatening divorce." "I could have been a more sensitive person." In pure grief there is a conspicuous absence of anxiety and guilt, since what was feared has in fact happened. The agitation, anger, and anxiety which often occur immediately after bereavement, should be regarded as part of the struggle against admitting that the loss has irretrievable taken place. As soon as the sufferer is fully conscious that nothing can be done, despair or deep sorrow takes the place of frantic grief. Irretrievable loss is not frantic, it is just sad.

Stage 6: "Sceond Adolescence"

The conflicts of marriage are over. The divorce has at least been decided upon and emotionally finalized at this point. "I am relieved. No longer am I living in hypocrisy. I feel more consistent with myself." Objectivity about the former spouse in the relationship returns to a degree. The return to normalcy begins when the individual can look back at the former spouse and the former life with a flutter of indifference. Instead of looking back on the former spouse with anger and attraction, the person during this stage is concentrating on his/her personal growth.

The feeling of relief is a difficult feeling for many people to admit who are going through divorce. Yet divorce frequently reduces the conflicts and tensions between two individuals. Divorce frees a person from financial bondage, emotional bondage, and eternal legal commitment. The feeling of having a burden removed prevails. Many times clients will remark, "I don't feel remorse and I don't feel guilty. But I feel guilty about not feeling guilty." Choices begin to increase. Vision clears. The excitement of

possible new adventures and new risks recreates an almost adolescent state.

Overreaction is common in this stage. There are no parents to censure; no husband or wife to restrict. Previous areas of deprivation, whether sexual, travel, fun, hobbies, friends or training are often vigorously pursued. A divorcing person may become sated and fall back into moderation. The imbalance in the opposite direction is gradually replaced by a more comfortable, integrated balance. The divorcing person discovers that dating dozens of different people simultaneously does not fill his/her needs as he/she once thought it would. The realization strikes that the cage was partially the other person but also partially your own.

Overreaction happens on another dimension--the clutch. The divorcing person may find a warm, understanding, compassionate person and want to stay. The other person may not be ready for the extreme dependency the individual wants to transfer onto him or her.

Dating often renews old adolescent feelings. "Is he/she going to call?" "Will he/she accept the invitation?" "I wonder if he/she will try to seduce me tonight?" Many of these thoughts and feelings were characteristic of adolescent years. Trying out new behaviors and not being assured of reinforcement is scary for an adolescent. Learning how to say "no" to a fellow or a girl who has just asked you out for a drink requires practiced confidence. Initiating a friendship takes finesse. The divorcing adult may feel like she/he has two strikes against him or her: He or she may not be familiar with these modern behaviors after being married so long and thinks at this age one should know them. Developing social skills are a helpful therapeutic intervention at this point.

A divorcing person may feel considerable intrigue and excitement during this stage. He/She has the age and the maturity now to discern more of what they want from a partner. The individual may have reconstructed his or her personality with the desireable old parts and some new levels of awareness, maturity, sensitivity and wisdom. The feeling of vulnerability has shaken the once-fixed defense mechanisms enough to reorganize them into a better self. Oftentimes there is new confidence in being able to transcend change. This experience adds solidarity to the self-esteem. Clients report that they feel more adaptable and more confident as a result of being divorced. Having had reordered old habits, rethought goals, restructured ideals, initiated new friendships and adapted to new people, the person feels more like a master of his or her own destiny. The anxiety that plagued the person about whether he or she could do all these things is now behind.

Stage 7: Exploration and Hard Work

With renewed vitality, the divorcing individual begins earnestly to pursue self-chosen goals. The state of the anxious floundering is over and recommitment to life and goals ensues. Instead of seeing overwhelming, unreachable future aspirations, he or she has broken down the dreams into manageable, reachable units. A plan of action has been implemented. The divorcing individual is self-rewarded and rewarded by others for accomplishment. A new intimate relationship, a commitment towards the children, a series of successes on the job all validate the new strengths. The activity in these stages has usually shifted from passive to active. Instead of being acted upon, the divorcing individual becomes the actor.

As the actor he or she is able to control his or her own destiny more capably and also have a greater impact on people with renewed self confidence, strengthened identity, and a greater ability to take risks.

The last stage does not happen in isolation. By this time, there are other significant persons intimately involved. The divorcing individual is more approachable and better able to receive kindness and compliments. In turn, he or she is giving more. Reinvestment in a job may have already imbursed him or her with higher pay, more attention or a promotion. Feedback from the outside enhances his or her internal feelings of worth. Now at the end of the divorce process, he or she has been changed from being stymied by it to being strengthened by it.

Once again, these are emotional rather than chronological stages. A divorcing person may experience several of these stages in one day. One of the most critical features of them is that few couples go through these stages at exactly the same pace. While one person may be detached long before physical separation, the other person may take months before completing this stage. The normal time I have found for an individual to work through all of these stages is anywhere from six months to two years. If the person takes much longer than two years and is still stuck in either the detachment stage or the mourning stage, he or she may need more individual attention in therapy.

DIVORCE ADJUSTMENT GROUPS

While the film may be used with general audiences, professionals, individuals and classes, the main raison d'être is for use with divorcing persons. One particularly effective media I have found are Divorce Adjustment Groups.

STAGES OF DIVORCE *

STAGES	EXPERIENCE	THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTION
1. Disillusion	Disappointment	Marriage Counseling i.e. Minnesota Couples Communication Training
2. Erosion	Chipping	Marriage Counseling Bach - Fair Fighting Skills Negotiation Skills Cash in Brown Stamps
3. Detachment	4 A's: Anger, Antipathy Ambivalence, Anticipation	Limbo Counseling
4. Physical Separation	Shock Emotional Yo-Yo Turtle Time Fumbling with Friends Dress Rehearsal Poisonous Passivity	Divorce Counseling 1. Emotional Coping Skills 2. Social Skills 3. Practical Problems/Information 4. Passive to Active
5. Mourning	Grief, Helplessness Relief, Anger	Divorce Counseling 1. Giving up Guilt 2. Gestalt Exercises 3. Divorce Ceremony 4. Focus on Self
6. Second Adolescence	Overreaction Identity Crisis	Divorce Counseling 1. Helping People Deal With Risks 2. Clarifying Real Self Through Overreaction
7. Exploration & Hard Work	Significant Other Persons Goal Setting	Gooodbye!

*Excerpted from The American Way of Divorce by Sheila Kessler, Ph.D., Nelson-Hall, Chicago, 1975

A Divorce Adjustment Group typically is comprised of about 15 persons, ranging in age from 21 to 65 and from all different social strata. Likewise, persons enter the group at all different stages of divorce (See "Stages of Divorce"). Several might be interested in developing new social skills while others want a place to release emotions. At first I thought this heterogeneity would be a problem, but soon discovered that the various perspectives were extremely important to the group dynamics. Although the formal contract with the group begins with a six-week commitment, the groups frequently extend that commitment a second or third or fourth six-weeks. Each leader reading this manual will have his/her own preference for length and commitment to the group. The advantage of making it originally a six-week commitment is that divorcing persons are very hesitant to make any commitments during this very existential period of his/her life. Six weeks is manageable. Impetus to continue will come from within the group is needs are still being met.

The primary purpose of a Divorce Adjustment Group is so the individual can have a support group through a transition period. People in these groups normally have emerged from a couples' world into a relative limbo. The Divorce Adjustment Group gives a place to safely ventilate emotions, regain identity as a single person, compare notes on alternative ways of handling situations, exchange information, and learn new social skills. The film helps expedite this whole process in several ways. First, it breaks through the social facade by realistically portraying issues that divorcing persons may have a hard time verbalizing. Secondly, it precipitates emotions that provide energy to work within the group. More specifically, four intervention points are built into each vignette in the film.

FOUR THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTIONS

Each vignette is designed with some or all of these four therapeutic interventions in mind: (1) cognitive restructuring (2) social skills

(3) emotional release and (4) information. The manual details questions and exercises which can be used in each category.

(1) COGNITIVE RESTRUCTURING: In transactional analysis terms, the cognitive restructuring means looking at the parent tapes. Rigid values may make it difficult for the divorcing person to adjust. These values may come from the church, from the peer group, from parents or from Hollywood advertising. Illustrations of such messages are: You have a personality problem if you divorce, security is more important than happiness, children without two parents are likely to become delinquents, a woman is not complete without a man (or vice versa), that there has to be a victim and a villain in a divorce. The vignettes help these value issues surface so that the divorcing person may make his/her own choices about what values are worth perpetuating.

A second level of cognitive restructuring are the messages the individual tells him/herself about what is critical to survival. Such messages may be "I have to be loved," "I cannot make myself happy, someone else has to do it for me," "I shouldn't be this emotional," "I have to stay in control," "I have to know all the answers," etc. During divorce, these perfectionistic demands on oneself are especially troublesome. The films help an individual relax about these ambitious self demands during a time when floundering is appropriate.

(2) SOCIAL SKILLS: Primary among the social skills is assertive training. The divorcing person may find him/herself confronted with social stereotypes or social myths about divorcees. Thus, it becomes important to learn how to assert one's own feelings, beliefs, and desires. Divorce is a particularly

desirable time to learn these skills because the old systems frequently no longer exist by which to lock the person in to former nonassertive responses.

Social skills other than assertive training are also built into the exercises in the manual. Communication skills that worked in marriage may no longer be appropriate in divorce. Such skills include practicing "Unintimate Communication" with a former spouse with whom you are trying to create some emotional distance, practicing describing the former spouse neutrally instead of white or black washing him/her. Likewise, discipline between two households in included in this category.

(3) EMOTIONAL RELEASE: The film may precipitate some emotions that necessitate working through. The most important intervention will be the perceptiveness and sensitivity of the clinician leading the group. Several questions and exercises have been detailed in the manual which should help the clinician move into more emotional terrain, and/or work through the feelings that have already surfaced. Please note again that the emotional release questions and exercises are tailored for those clinicians already involved in psychotherapy. Persons without clinical training and at least a Master's degree should steer clear of this intervention.

(4) INFORMATION: Information can be a vital link for a person who is unaccustomed to the legal world, obtaining credit, ferreting out social organizations, finding a roommate, looking for a job, etc. The group (and leader) provide a valuable function in information sharing. Consider the information questions at the end of the vignettes to make sure that you can answer the questions. Divorcing persons appreciate your having a basic level of awareness about the legal aspects of divorce. If you have a choice, you may find it helpful to bring in a lawyer to one of your group meetings.